

Suffering as Narrative Imprisonment

Long Abstract

There have been many philosophical proposals on the nature of suffering (Brady, 2018; Corns, 2021; McClelland, 2020); however, few have explored the relationship between suffering and self-narrative. This paper argues that self-narrative plays a crucial role in suffering and that suffering is best understood as narrative imprisonment. Suffering arises when an agent's self-narrative no longer adequately accommodates their lived circumstances and persists insofar as this mismatch remains unresolved.

The close connection between suffering and the narrative self becomes particularly evident when suffering is examined through the lens of transformative experience. Carel and Kidd (2020), for instance, suggest that many experiences of suffering can be illuminated as forms of transformative experience—a term coined by L. A. Paul (2014)—in that they can fundamentally alter a person's values, preferences, or identity. This suggests that suffering involves major changes of one's self-narrative.

To develop this account, I adopt and revise Miyahara and Tanaka's (2025) notion of narrative imprisonment. According to their account, individuals may become trapped within self-narratives that restrict their identity and agency, thereby undermining their well-being, particularly through processes such as overidentification with a narrative role. While this

framework successfully captures how rigid narratives can constrain individuals, it remains too narrow to fully explain suffering. Narrative imprisonment does not necessarily require strong identification with an existing self-narrative. Individuals may become narratively imprisoned even when they recognize that their current self-narrative no longer fits their lived circumstances but lack viable alternative narratives through which to reinterpret their situation. Moreover, existing narratives may continue to structure self-understanding through strong sociocultural and environmental reinforcement, even in the absence of deep personal endorsement.

This paper therefore proposes an expanded conception of narrative imprisonment, according to which it occurs whenever an individual's existing self-narrative fails to accommodate their lived circumstances but nevertheless continues to shape their self-understanding. On this view, narrative imprisonment provides a powerful explanatory framework for the nature of suffering, with overidentification representing only one among several mechanisms through which such constraint may arise.

This expanded account allows for responses to several potential objections. First, suffering is not always transformative. The proposed framework accommodates this by distinguishing between different responses to narrative mismatch. In some cases, individuals revise their self-narratives, resulting in transformative experiences in Paul's sense. In other cases, individuals attempt to modify their circumstances in order to preserve their existing narratives, and suffering may occur without deep personal transformation. Second, one might object that some forms of suffering are non-narrative, citing cases of purely physical pain. This paper argues that such cases are better understood as pain rather than suffering. While pain may occur without narrative organization, suffering characteristically involves temporally extended evaluative interpretations of one's

condition and its significance for one's self-understanding. It is this temporally structured and evaluative dimension that makes suffering particularly amenable to narrative explanation.

Compared to existing theories, this narrative account offers several advantages. In particular, it explains why suffering has the potential to be transformative without being necessarily so, and why it is closely connected to questions of identity and agency. It also explains why suffering characteristically involves temporally extended processes rather than occurring instantaneously. This temporal feature is especially illuminating, since resolving suffering requires the reconstruction or stabilization of one's self-narrative—processes that necessarily unfold over time. While pain itself may be either momentary or prolonged, suffering involves a distinctive reorganization of one's narrative self-understanding that cannot occur instantaneously.

Finally, this account has important practical implications. If suffering is best understood through the framework of narrative imprisonment, then alleviating suffering involves more than reducing negative affect or altering external circumstances. It also requires attention to how individuals understand themselves and their lives. Helping sufferers, on this view, involves assisting them in reconstructing or renegotiating their self-narratives, thereby loosening the constraints imposed by narrative imprisonment.

Keywords: suffering, narrative self, narrative imprisonment

References

- Brady, M. (2018). *Suffering and Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carel, H., & Kidd, I. J. (2020). Suffering as transformative experience. In D. Bain, M. Brady, & J. Corns (Eds.), *Philosophy of Suffering*. Routledge.
- Corns, J. (2021). Suffering as significantly disrupted agency. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 102(1), 114–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12677>
- Edwards, S. D. (2003). Three concepts of suffering. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 6, 59–66
- Miyahara, K., & Tanaka, S. (2025). Narrative imprisonment. *Topoi*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-025-10301-5>
- Paul, L. A. (2014). *Transformative Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McClelland, T. (2020). The disruption model of suffering. In D. Bain, M. Brady, & J. Corns (Eds.), *Philosophy of Suffering*. Routledge.